

## **Imprisoned vets tell their war stories for history**

By DAVID DISHNEAU

HAGERSTOWN, Md. (AP) — As U.S. forces withdrew from Vietnam in early 1974, Seaman Apprentice Frederic D. Jones was fighting his own battles.

The cocky Baltimore teenager spent nearly three months AWOL in the Philippines. There, he said, he played cat-and-mouse with shore patrol while fending off a murderous drug dealer, romancing the sister of a militia leader and robbing other servicemen to feed his heroin habit.

Eventually caught, Jones negotiated an honorable discharge but couldn't stay clean. An armed robbery spree in 1995 got him a 45-year sentence in the Maryland Correctional Institution near Hagerstown.

While Jones, now 52, is locked away from society, his war story has been preserved for posterity. He is among the first incarcerated veterans to tell his military service tale to the Library of Congress Veterans History Project.

Video recordings of more than 30 inmates at the medium-security prison are archived at the library's American Folklife Center, along with those of nearly 60,000 other veterans. Just one other prison, the Fairton Federal Correctional Institution in Fairton, N.J., has collected veterans' stories, said Bob Patrick, director of the Veterans History Project.

Congress created the oral history program in 2000 to document the personal wartime experiences of American service members. The library doesn't try to verify their stories, but The Associated Press confirmed the service records of the inmates mentioned in this report.

Patrick said that by recognizing their roles in history, the project dignifies the service of veterans who take part. Jones was so proud of his videotape that he had a copy sent to his elderly mother.

"She was so overjoyed and surprised," he said.

Since any veteran, no matter how decorated or disgraced, can contribute to the archive, Jones' story was as welcome as that of any admiral. And it's hard to imagine one more colorful.

On his nearly 90-minute recording, Jones recounts his adventures as a "young, wild, impulsive," 18-year-old in and around the Subic Bay Naval Base. There, he said, a female gang called the Black Stockings helped him steal cash and watches from drunken sailors and aided him in avoiding a drug dealer he had wronged.

"I ended up getting a contract on my life," Jones says. "I felt like I had never left home."

Jones, who is black, said he enlisted in the Navy seeking structure and style — he liked the bell-bottomed uniforms — but he quickly grew disenchanted by the racism and drug use he found.

"I'd had my own preconceived ideas what the military was — I mean straight-up, strict discipline," Jones says on the video, made a year ago. "The drugs, the gang mentality — it was all right there in the military. It was a big letdown."

In a June interview with the AP, Jones said he doesn't blame the military for his mistakes but has found in prison the sort of discipline he had expected from the Navy. Behind bars, he and 58-year-old John E. Barba, who is serving a life sentence for robbing and murdering a methamphetamine maker, have become co-chairmen of the prison's veterans history committee.

Guided by materials from the Library of Congress, they have become such skilled interviewers since last fall that they and prison librarian Mary Stevanus, who spearheaded the history project, hope to produce a how-to booklet or video for other veterans groups, in or out of prison.

"What you're looking for is the meat of the stuff," said Barba, who served domestically in the Navy from 1970 to 1974. Working together, he and Jones conduct informal "pre-interviews" with their subjects, making notes of compelling material "so when they're giving their interview, we can dive in," Barba said.

They extracted a harrowing account from Ronald L. McClary, 62, of his experience under fire as a fresh-faced Marine in Vietnam. On his video, the burly inmate, seated before a large U.S. flag, recalls his daily "search-and-destroy" missions.

"Every day, you would look at one of your buddies and wonder who wasn't going home today or who was going to get killed today. Everybody knew it was going to be somebody," said McClary, who is serving 12 years for the second-degree murder of his wife in Baltimore 2005.

He recounted a firefight in which two buddies were killed.

"Three rounds went off. The first round hit Amos in the head. Amos fell. When Amos fell, Cope looked around and looked down at Amos. The second round hit Cope in the head. And I seen it. I told you, three rounds went off. Cope was to my left. Amos was to

my left, and then there was me. You cannot tell me today the third round wasn't meant for me. But I was down. I was eating dirt."

Ordered by his lieutenant to get up and charge the enemy, McClary fired two shots before his gun jammed. "I had to get back down," he says on the video. "I've never been so scared in all my life."

Jones said he feels privileged hearing such stories.

"These guys have kept this stuff to themselves for 40 years," he said. "You'll see one guy that actually breaks down and cries. I mean, these are hardened criminals and he breaks down and cries on his video."

About 226,000 of the nation's 25.1 million veterans were in prison or jail in 1998, according to the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics' most recent report on the subject.

Matt Davison, chairman of an incarcerated veterans project for New York-based VietNow National, a veterans advocacy group, said most inmate vets he's met are proud of having served — and many feel remorse for having done something dishonorable.

Barba said most of the inmates he has interviewed for the history project express gratitude that they were able to serve.

In one video, white-haired World War II vet Lee D. Gerhold, doing 50 years for arranging an ex-wife's murder, grips his cane and says, "I'm thankful to the country for accepting me."